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How can diversity help business?

**Alexandra Lopez-Pacheo, Financial Post** Published: Monday, November 17, 2008

Take a look around. According to Statistics Canada, there were more than six million people living in Canada in 2006 who were born in a foreign country. The number of new immigrants is growing and accounts for most of the country's population growth in 2008, with more than 69,200 immigrants entering between April and June alone.

What's more, cultural diversity does not end with first-generation immigrants, so the number of people in Canada who form part of the many communities we have is far greater than just the statistics on immigration reveal. These millions of people are consumers, workers, professionals and business owners. Put succinctly, having a culturally diverse workforce can help your business tap into the wealth of resources and opportunities that these communities have to offer.

"If you look at how the banks now staff their branches, they reflect the cultural diversity in the local community," says Kevin McLellan, manager for hireimmigrants.ca, a Web site of the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) that provides employers with interactive tools and resources to help them through the process of finding right through to retaining immigrants. "So if businesses want to be successful in selling locally, they need to understand how to tailor their offerings to the culturally diverse communities they are selling to."

The best way to understand how to do this is through employees who are part of the local communities and understand the language and the nuances of the culture. They can connect with customers if they are frontline workers or help develop strategies and campaigns that will connect your company to multi-cultural communities if they are in the managerial team. Such employees can play a pivotal role in helping a business expand its market base locally or beyond.

"Buyers of goods and services are increasingly from a diverse background," says Jane Allen, chief diversity officer at Deloitte, a corporate partner in a new federal government initiative Assisting Local Leaders with Immigrant Employment Strategies (ALLIES), designed to help employers integrate skilled new Canadians into the workforce. The buying power of culturally diverse communities isn't restricted to major cities in the most populated provinces, which have typically attracted immigrants. These days, there are record numbers of immigrants moving to Prince Edward Island, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. "So there's a market out there, and by having diverse employees with a diverse approach to how you reach out to the marketplace, you're going to be more successful and capture more market share and maintain customer loyalty," Ms. Allen says.

"If they believe you understand their community, whatever that community might be, and that you have an appreciation for diversity because you have diverse employees, that's going to help you in the marketplace."

If you're trying to expand globally, having employees from your target markets can be a valuable asset. "We've seen examples where companies selling overseas benefitted from having employees from different countries and they've been able to successfully bring in contracts from those countries in part because they have people from them who know how to do business there," Mr. McLellan says.

Another way having a culturally diverse workforce can help your business: "By having employees with different and diverse perspectives, you're going to have better results in problem-solving than if you bring into a room a group of people who've all gone to the same schools, all had the same experiences growing up," Ms. Allen says. Most immigrants are highly skilled and educated -- far more so than the majority of the Canadian population. With the increasing difficulties businesses are facing in attracting top talent, companies that create a workplace that is welcoming to people from different cultures will have a competitive advantage today -- and tomorrow, when it is projected that new immigrants will be the largest source of workforce growth in the country. "If you have a culture that really embraces diversity, you can attract top talent from culturally diverse communities and keep them. All the efforts and time you spend on recruiting and promoting people will pay off," Ms. Allen says.

It's important to understand that Canada has many skilled and highly educated and talented immigrants who are currently unemployed or underemployed, Mr. McLellan says. "Employers might have to make some allowances within their company or bring in some new HR practices and policies, but in the long run they're going to benefit."

An early step to diversify your workforce, Ms. Allen says, is to assess your working environment and identify where you may have issues or opportunities to bring in people from different backgrounds. "That starts with speaking with people in your workforce who are minorities or immigrants. Maybe form a little advisory group to recommend ways a business can be more inclusive."

Review your practices, how you manage people's performance as well as how you promote and hire. "It's very important to make sure your business does not have any built-in biases when you're looking at people's performance," Ms. Allen says. Understand that there are different ways to get a job done and done well, so be open-minded.

"People from different cultures, especially recent immigrants, aren't always attuned to the rules of getting ahead in Canada and these unwritten rules can be, for example, that you need to be outgoing, more aggressive whereas people from other cultures might believe that you should be more differential."

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